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Trailing utopia. Initiation of communitas through feminist art

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Abstract: In this article, I am exploring the ways in which contemporary art can produce community. By community I mean not a belonging to a specific group, but the political-philosophical concept of communitas as an open, unstructured, and egalitarian bonding; a rupturing with established hierarchies and an opening up of new possibilities and interactions in common solidarity. I want to investigate into the conditions if and how art can initiate political change by affectively moving us towards communitas as a utopian project – instead of leading to passive partaking and political disengagement. In order to answer this question I will consider the example of an exhibition called Producing Futures – An Exhibition on Post-Cyber-Feminisms shown in early 2019 in the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich, Switzerland.

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Initiation of *communitas* through feminist art

TEXT: NINA SEILER

In this article, I am exploring the ways in which contemporary art can produce community. By community I mean not a belonging to a specific group, but the political-philosophical concept of *communitas* as an open, unstructured, and egalitarian bonding; a rupturing with established hierarchies and an opening up of new possibilities and interactions in common solidarity. I want to investigate into the conditions if and how art can initiate political change by affectively moving us towards *communitas* as a utopian project – instead of leading to passive partaking and political disengagement.¹ In order to answer this question I will consider the example of an exhibition called *Producing Futures – An Exhibition on Post-Cyber-Feminisms* shown in early 2019 in the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich, Switzerland.

The major theoretical work on *communitas* in the above sense was composed by white male academics;² a position most privileged to discard actual inequalities and personal life stories, prone to abstraction and generalisation. Many feminist approaches nowa-

days try to refrain from universalisation, and this is why I will make observations on the exhibition drawing from my personal experience and interaction with the art exhibited. I hope this will enlighten the way processes of *communitas* may take place unpredictably but in accordance with personal backgrounds. It seems especially important to me in view of the given exhibition to reconsider between what/whom interaction can take place, and who/what can initiate *communitas*?

In the exhibition, three pieces by conceptual artist Anicka Yi – *Home in 30 Days, Don't Wash, We Are Water*, and *Your Hand Feels like a Pillow that's Been Microwaved*, all 2015 – criticise «power structures of the art world and its institutional sexism»³. The pieces frame sexism as a form of immunisation – as a mechanism contrary to the permeability and openness of *communitas*⁴ – against feminist movements and counter-networking. Yi confronts the art world with a bacterial serum collected from 100 female artists, functioning as some sort of agent, developing and threatening to break down the immunitarian

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barriers of the male dominated art world. However, these artistic suggestions develop their impact on the observer only through an explanatory sign, catalogue, or guide, as the sculptures themselves remain in this respect mute – an observation I have experienced myself but also heard from other visitors.

An interesting example for choreographic interaction with both the artistic suggestion and the fellow observers is the video installation *A day in the life of bliss* by Wu Tsang (2014). Arranged in a dark room, we find two screens with two different video projections, a mirror and a two-way mirror. Due to the canny positioning of the mirrors, the visitors sitting on beanbags are integrated into the piece, as they, or parts of them, are reflected. It becomes difficult to distinguish if movements happen on screen or originate in the room itself. Moreover, in some of the video sequences, we see yet another public watching the dance performance of a figure called BLIS. An impression of melting or interpenetrating realities arises, especially when the room is crowded with visitors moving in and out. In an interview in *Sleek* magazine, both Tsang and boychild, the performer imper-

sonating BLIS, describe performance in the setting of nightlife as something, which erases «boundaries in the dynamics of performer and viewer»: «You're on the same level with the performance and the viewer; you're on the floor together having the experience. [...] It's creating a shared space versus dominating.»⁵

- 1 Lepecki, André: From Partaking to Initiating. Leadingfollowing as Dance's (a-Personal) Political Singularity, in: Hölscher, Stefan; Siegmund, Gerald (ed.): *Dance, Politics & Co-Immunity*. Zürich 2013, p. 21–38.
- 2 E.g. Nancy, Jean-Luc; Blanchot, Maurice; Agamben Giorgio; Esposito, Roberto.
- 3 Information sign Anicka Yi: *Home in 30 Days, Don't Wash; We Are Water; Your Hand Feels like a Pillow that's Been Microwaved*. All Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst Zürich, 2015.
- 4 Esposito, Roberto: *Communitas. The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Stanford 2010; *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*. Cambridge, Malden 2011; Lorey, Isabell: *Figuren des Immunen. Elemente einer politischen Theorie*. Zürich 2011.
- 5 Perlson, Hili: *Truth in Gender*. Wu Tsang and Boychild on the Question of Queerness. *Sleek*, 29 January 2014. <https://bit.ly/2XAf6ht>.

Precisely this togetherness is initiated by the installation even though the performer is not present in person: in the dark, crowded room, you are unsure who impersonates what; borders of absence and presence, of «they» and «us» are shifting or becoming obsolete.

The same artistic suggestion is also worth considering from a different choreographic perspective. Before entering the room, one can read the sign explaining some of the technical details of the production as well as the «idea» behind it or the interpretative suggestions the artistic installation offers: «online avatars, the so-called LOOKS have developed consciousness. Parasites feeding on our vital energy, they have seized power and established a regime of pervasive control».⁶ But to me, this information was «lost» the moment I stepped into the room, both because I tend to superficially digest the information given on the signs and because the experienced artistic suggestion did not seem to relate to the given information. I was so intrigued by the excitingly queer, non-binary corporeality of the protagonist(s) that this additional information left me rather bewildered.

Meanwhile, I think exactly this edging uncertainty about these mysterious LOOKS kept me from completely immersing into the bodily movements of the protagonists and follow them *passively*. I was strongly affected and moved from the reality of the exhibition into another sphere – both mentally and physically. I was somehow «feeling like [I’m] falling or being sucked into a vortex»⁷, as Tsang describes the effect a music remix can have, comparing it to boychild’s performances. However, I would not say I was falling into a void, but into a commonality of bodies unbound. The layered visibility of these bodies both on screen and in the exhibition room developed something like a rhizome of movement and exchange, extending into an unknown virtual space, exploring forms of interaction with fellow bodies, immaterial entities and an obscure, fragmented physical environment. I engaged with the risk to stray from the direction proposed on the information sign, a path I felt was imposed upon me by the informative setting. I risked «activating movement towards the actualization of a yet unmapped nascent event»⁸: the impression of a crowd, of the voluntary choreographisation and active engagement of our

bodies in material and virtual spaces. I would say this was the space/time we were actualising *communitas*, a moment of political activation.

The exhibition as a conglomerate of artistic suggestions choreospacially arranged, the supplementation by information signs or explanatory talks, and the actualisation by the observers can in certain space/times function as the interval of the political. But it can also – sometimes – remain mute to us, it can bewilder us without opening a fissure, without allowing us to step in. This depends very much on our personal ability and will to process, (mis)understand and (mis)interpret what is offered to us. It depends on how our life stories, our personal experiences and convictions interact with the initiatives approaching us. The exhibition and the artistic suggestions choreographed within it strive to question and overcome partitions constructed as immunitarian boundaries and perform in many ways a commonality embracing not only specifically gendered human beings, but extending to a post-human communication with material and virtual things, artificial intelligence and animals, celebrating a Rancièrian «indifference»⁹.

I would like to pose one last question concerning the implications such an actualisation of *communitas* brings. If the fleeting moment of the artistic activation passes, does it all fall to dust again? Or does it leave traces behind, a fissure like an ongoing tumult, still producing the future we have glimpsed during our interaction with the artistic suggestion? If we «understand the body as a reservoir of dissensual somatic-political capacities»¹⁰, maybe it is possible to conserve something of the workings of the political, a lingering will to «misfit» without disengagement nesting in our bodies, nagging at our immunitarian boundaries.

6 Information sign Wu Tsang: A Day in the Life of Bliss. Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst Zürich, 2014.

7 Perlson, op. cit.

8 Lepecki, op. cit., p. 34.

9 Rancière, Jacques: The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible. London 2006, p. 15.

10 Lepecki, op. cit., p. 22.